



Staff photo/Charles Mathewson

Soldiers manned a fort during the Revolutionary War at the site of the Gurnet lighthouse.

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Remains of fort underneath lighthouse

By Charles Mathewson
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PLYMOUTH — Revolutionary War fort in Plymouth? That can't be. Must be the wrong town. But a fort built in Revolutionary War and manned through the Civil War exists in one of the most remote, yet most visible, parts of town. Under the white lighthouse at the end of the Gurnet in Plymouth Bay lies Fort Andrew.

The Blizzard of '78 began a pattern of erosion on the bluff the lighthouse and fort sit on. It removed the bushes and grasses which held the bluff's surface together. Rain pouring over the top of the bluff and wind blowing along the bluff have turned it into a receding sand cliff.

Now the Coast Guard wants to move the lighthouse out of the way of erosion. The residents of the Gurnet want the Coast Guard to stop the erosion rather than move the lighthouse. The conservation commission will hear again from both sides Monday night at town hall.

The commission will consider the issue within the narrow powers it has to enforce the state's wetlands protection act. The larger issue seeking a forum is the value of the fort.

"Compared with Valley Forge, it's not well known," said Peggy Baker, director of the Pilgrim Hall museum. "It wasn't the scene of a major battle, but it's ours so we care for it and it's the only piece of Revolutionary War history in the area."

In 1776 the towns of Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury built an earthen fort on the elbow of the peninsula at the opening of Plymouth Bay known as the Gurnet. The earth berms beside the twin towers of Plymouth Light enclosed barracks which housed 60 men under the command of Capt. William Weston. They manned a battery of cannons on top of the bluff.

The cannons aimed down at all shipping coming and going from Plymouth Bay. They did their job. Soon after the beginning of the war, British ships approached Plymouth, saw the fort and withdrew.

The wooden lighthouses burned in 1803. They were replaced inside the pattern of earth berms which exists today.

In the War of 1812 another company of 30 soldiers were posted at the fort. In 1812 the *HMS Niger*, commanded by a Capt. Talbot, searched for American privateers along the coast. The ship's crew spotted the fort and Talbot decided to attack. Several shots were exchanged. The *Niger's* cannons destroyed one of the lighthouse beacons, but the American fort put up more of a barrage and forced the ship to retreat. In his haste, Talbot briefly grounded the *Niger* on Brown's Bank, but got loose before American boats could reach his ship.

At the outbreak of the Civil War the fort was completely rebuilt and named Fort Andrew, after the governor of Massachusetts at the time. It saw no action. "It's one of the under-researched pieces of Plymouth history," Baker said. "It would be wonderful to have more of an opportunity to learn about it."

Her husband James Baker, director of research at Plimoth Plantation, found some letters describing the fort and its history at the Hanover Historical Society. It's the best source of information on the fort found to date.